LISTEN
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Psalm 104:24–34
John 20:19–23
Acts 2:1–12

"Each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. . . .
All were amazed"
Acts 2:6, 12 (NRSV)

While the committed often lack civility, the civil often lack commitment. The real challenge is to have committed civility. We must learn how to engage
in that high level discourse, to treat other people as having value even when we seriously disagree with them. That's the challenge. We need to state our convictions honestly and listen to each other genuinely.

Martin E. Marty
"Civility in the Workplace,"
An Iowa State University Forum

As your Spirit came to followers of Jesus to give them new life and to bind them together in your church, so, O God, come to us. Fill us with your spirit of love and justice and compassion. Give us ears to hear one another, our dear and closest ones, our friends, and our neighbors. Give us ears to hear the word you have for us today. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The problem for the preachers this morning is that there are two different but important items on the agenda today. It is Pentecost Sunday, sometimes known as the birthday of the church, when the Spirit of God came upon the disciples and transformed them into brave followers of the crucified and risen Christ. Christianity, the Christian church, began on Pentecost, and everywhere Christians are thinking about the life-giving Spirit of God, the very breath of God, which is another word for Spirit. The preacher cannot ignore Pentecost.

It is also Mother's Day, and no preacher with any sense at all would risk ignoring it. Every year someone calls and says, "I'm bringing mother to

church Sunday, so make it good. And she doesn't want to hear about gun control." It's not only Mother's Day, it's the 150th anniversary of the celebration.

Pentecost is about the life-giving energy and power of God, the Spirit that gives birth to new life, creates miracles, and is, in many languages, a feminine noun and maternal image. Mother's Day celebrates the life-giving love that birthed each one of us and which, in many ways, continues to be a powerful metaphor for the love of God, which continues with us long after our mothers are gone, as long as we live.

The editorials in the paper this morning were about mothers. Mary Schmich and Eric Zorn wrote about their mothers in the *Tribune* and even Thomas Friedman, in the *New York Times*, titled his column, "Call Your Mother." Friedman's mother died recently, and he wrote about the persistence and consistency of her love throughout all her life. He closed with a story about the late Bear Bryant, legendary and very tough football coach at the University of Alabama. Late in his career, after his own mother had died, Bryant agreed to do a TV commercial for South Central Bell Telephone. It was very simple—some nice music and Bear Bryant, with his rough voice, saying: "Have you called your Mama today?" In the studio to do the filming, the music played, Coach Bryant looked into the camera and said: "Have you called your Mama today?" and then he ad-libbed "I sure wish I could call mine." Me too, Thomas Friedman said. Me, too.

My favorite was Garrison Keillor's column, "Nobody Loves You Like Your Mama Does," in the *Tribune* Thursday, in which he reflects humorously on the realities of motherhood, of birthing and caring for infants, that it requires so much of a sacrifice of a mother's own life that her children walk into the house one day, as Irma Bombeck once observed, and ask her, "Is anybody home?"

"But she loves you," Keillor wrote. "You could come home with snakes tattooed on your face and she would still see the good in you. She knows when you're in trouble. And you will get into deep trouble some day. Count on it. But your mother will still love you. Like an old lioness, she'll come running, even if you're 2,000 miles away."

Keillor concluded, "Buy her something nice, like a set of gold ingots. Or a black car with a chauffeur. At least write a note" (*Chicago Tribune*, 8 May 2008).

Pentecost is about a life-giving spirit that creates miracles and gives birth to something new. On the day itself, Pentecost, several weeks after Passover, the city of Jerusalem was, once again, filled with pilgrims from all over the world. They were there to celebrate the holiday, also known as the Feast of

Weeks, the end of the spring harvest. It's quite an international, multicultural, multiethnic crowd: "Parthians, Medes, Elamites," people from as far away as Asia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Jews and Arabs.

One of the things I love best about the city is the sound of many languages. If you go for a Sunday afternoon walk on the lakefront, you will hear a gorgeous cacophony of language: Japanese, Hindi, Polish, Korean, Farsi, Russian—occasionally English. And you will see people somehow managing to communicate: the couple from India, she's in a beautiful, flowing gown; he has on a handsome gray suit, white shirt open at the collar; their gorgeous child with shining dark eyes in the stroller is wearing a Chicago Bears cap. The father holds out a camera, and you stop and take their picture, and you all smile. You tell them this child is beautiful; they say "Thank you," and you all tilt your head forward in a small bow. It's a miracle. Communication.

On Pentecost, something happened that defies description. The writer says there was a rushing wind and tongues of fire. I love the way El Greco portrayed it in a famous painting: the disciples of Jesus sitting in a row with a flame on each head like a small propane jet (see Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p. 98). They had been sitting around in Jerusalem for several weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection appearance of their Lord. They weren't sure what to do next. They were waiting for something to happen. And what happened was a powerful experience: they were inspired, filled with God's Spirit. And they were powerfully transformed. They became courageous, determined, strong disciples of Jesus Christ—and they found their voice.

From the Pentecost experience has come modern Pentecostalism, the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world, literally sweeping across South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Religious scholars are scrambling to keep up with the phenomenon. It is frequently misunderstood. Pentecostals are not necessarily biblical fundamentalists, nor are they necessarily theologically and politically conservative. Their expression of Christianity is full of exuberance and high emotion. Their worship is full of spontaneity, clapping, shouting, weeping, singing, and occasionally speaking in tongues, an experience of religious ecstasy in which an individual speaks with sounds that are new and unrecognizable.

A careful reading of the account in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles reveals a surprise. The phenomenon of Pentecost, the real miracle, was not speaking in tongues that could not be understood, but the very opposite. The miracle is understanding. Communication. Speaking and hearing and comprehending. The Pentecost crowd is astonished—not by a cacophony of indistinguishable voices, an outbreak of speaking in tongues, a religious oddity, but by hearing clearly, understanding.

Peter, on Pentecost finally, raises his voice and tells about the saving, life-giving love of God in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, the first Christian sermon, and everybody understands and 3,000 people believe and the Christian church is born. The miracle of communication.

Think how difficult it is—to communicate across barriers of culture, ethnicity, religion, ideology, and language. Think how difficult it is for Americans to communicate with Chinese or North Koreans. A breakthrough occurred recently when the New York Philharmonic traveled to North Korea and the language of music somehow expressed a common humanity that words simply cannot accomplish. Our two nations have no diplomatic ties, are still technically at war, and barely speak to one another. One American musician managed to get close to the front row of the audience as the crowd gathered, managed to take a few pictures of the North Koreans, all dressed elegantly and immaculately for the occasion. He caught the eye of a North Korean woman; she waved her hand discretely. A small miracle. But how difficult it is to overcome the barriers that culture and history and language erect. Israel is celebrating sixty years of independence this week. The Arabic word for it is Nakba, “The Catastrophe,” which is how the Palestinian people describe it. As American military and political leaders tried to communicate in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—mostly unsuccessfully—with the Hopi people, it took a long time to discover that there is no Hopi word for “time.” Think how difficult it is to communicate anything between a people who live by the clock—who measure each day by the hours and carry out life on the basis of time-specific scheduling, appointments, meetings—and a people with no word for time.

Communication is difficult between nations and cultures and subcultures. We must continue to learn about the different ways life is experienced by African American and white people living in the same community and how language becomes one of the challenges. Think how differently the simple phrase “police protection” or “the police are on their way” is heard by us—for whom it is clear and comforting—and the community that watched fifteen white police beating three black men in Philadelphia last week.

And it is no less challenging between individuals. One of the strong cultural messages we receive regularly is about self expression. We are encouraged by teachers and therapists and self-help gurus to learn how to express ourselves, to tell how we feel, to repress nothing. Part of self awareness, self-actualization, we are told, is bringing to speech our feelings, all of them, whether anyone is interested or not. In interpersonal conversation, we invest all our energy in speaking and little, if any, in listening. While our conversation partner is telling us about a recent trip to the Rocky Mountains, we’re not so much listening as composing our account of our trip. The miracle is when someone actually listens and hears.

One of the things seminarians are taught is the importance of listening —"active listening" it is sometimes called. People don't necessarily want expert advice when they come to see us; they want and need someone to listen, to hear them out—not to make judgments, critical comments, dispense advice, but to listen.

I am fascinated with the popularity over the years of television shows that depict people successfully communicating, talking, and listening. *Cheers*—a tavern in which people talk to one another. *Seinfeld*—a group of city friends, talking. *Boston Legal,* which concludes with two very good friends, at the end of the day, sitting in chairs, smoking cigars, sipping Scotch—and talking. Communicating—speaking and listening.

In the public sphere there is more shouting and arguing and accusing—and an absence of the civility that is absolutely necessary for conversation to happen. Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary, himself a very civil man—even with people with whom he disagrees—reminds us that civility comes from the Latin for "city." Civility is the ability to get along with others in the city. And Martin Marty put his finger on the crisis in public discourse recently, with ideological opponents firing verbal salvos at one another: The civil often lack commitment and the committed often lack civility. What we need is committed civility.

A good example of that was the relationship between two public figures who died recently: William F. Buckley Jr. and Norman Mailer. Buckley was deeply conservative, socially and politically; urbane, witty, acerbic, brilliant, always courteous. Mailer, the novelist, deeply liberal, a street fighter, literally one of our best writers, pugnacious, argumentative.

As it turns out, Buckley and Mailer were friends. Mailer was a frequent guest at Buckley's literary dinner parties in New York, and one can only imagine the conversation. I was fascinated to learn that in 1963 they held a debate, here in Chicago, at the Medinah Temple. Three thousand people paid $2.50 to hear it, and it was so successful and they enjoyed it so much that they talked about taking it on the road.

Time was not long ago when politicians modeled civil communication by reaching across the aisle to work together with political opponents instead of attacking, maligning, calling into question everything from patriotism to religion and choice of churches. Time was when Illinois Senator and Republican leader Everett Dirksen would reach across the aisle and work with a Democratic president to get a Civil Rights Act passed—something that's almost hard to imagine today. Dirksen used to describe himself as "a man of fixed and unbending principles—and one of my principles is

flexibility" (Tom Daschle, "Free Speech and Civil Discourse in Turbulent Times," Kansas State University speech).

The capacity to communicate, to speak and to hear, is always a gift of God. It is to be in communion with one another. It is what defines us as human beings—this miraculous ability. Everyone else in creation acts out of chemical messages, instincts, and urges. We alone talk to one another, consider what others have to say, listen to others before we act. We speak and occasionally we listen. We communicate.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in a fine book *The Spirit of Life*, says that "the capacity to communicate, to be in communion with others is always a gift of God" (p. 219).

There is no more powerful way to deny the very being of another than by refusing to listen. There is no better way to kill intimacy than to stop listening. And there is no better way to love—no greater gift—than to listen.

That is what happened on Pentecost. God's Spirit came—people spoke, people heard, people understood. And part of what they understood that day was the love of God and the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, that would always be with them to inspire, to empower, to lift them up when they fell, to comfort them when they grieved, to bind up their wounds, to love them forever. A miracle.

Thanks be to God.